

‘A Dozy City’: Adelaide in J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man* and Amy T. Matthews’ *End of the Night Girl*

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A blog post by Michael Duffy from May 2011, titled ‘Is Adelaide Our Cruellest City?’, begins:

I was on a panel at the recent Sydney Writers Festival where novelists talked about the ideal cities in which to set crime fiction. Michael Connelly (Los Angeles), Gary Disher (Melbourne) and myself (Sydney) agreed the most important thing is for a city to be big enough to have experienced most types of evil, so that any horror will seem believable if set there in a novel.

But Gary reminded us there is one city that fits this bill despite its relative smallness: Adelaide, the ‘city of corpses’.

Although Adelaide’s murder rate is no higher than anywhere else in Australia, it has had more than its share of particularly gruesome and distressing murders. ... Salman Rushdie once nominated Adelaide as ‘the perfect setting for a Stephen King novel or horror film’.¹

There are plenty of examples of books and films trading on this reputation, one of the most notable recent examples being the 2011 film *Snowtown*, which dramatises the gruesome series of murders committed in and around Adelaide in the 1990s by John Bunting and his associates. Susan Mitchell’s book about these murders, *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (2005), emphasised the creepy quality she projected onto the northern suburbs where most of the so-called Snowtown murders took place and where Bunting lived. In local author Lisa L.

¹ Although this post is signed only ‘National Times’, a check of the Sydney Writers Festival website reveals the poster to be Michael Duffy.

Hannett's 2011 book of short stories, *Bluegrass Symphony*, which is set in an alternative version of somewhere like the southern states of the US, the author biography on the front flyleaf mentions the fact that she lives in Adelaide, 'city of churches, bizarre murders, and pie floaters'. Stephen Orr's award-winning novel *Time's Long Ruin* (2010) is a fictional version of the unexplained disappearance of the three Beaumont children in 1966, and in the following year he published a non-fiction book called *The Cruel City*, investigating the phenomenon of Adelaide's bizarre and murderous reputation.

Duffy's blog post quoted above continues 'In the past decade there has been nothing to equal the above horrors. Stephen Orr concludes his book [*The Cruel City*] with the hope that "in time Adelaide's reputation as evil, a city of corpses, will fade."' Orr, one might cheekily note, is not on the face of it particularly committed to dampening this reputation, given his preoccupation with exploring it in both fiction and non-fiction. I hasten to add that *Time's Long Ruin* is an excellent novel, and a deserving winner of the Adelaide Festival Unpublished Manuscript award and a 2012 National Year of Reading award.

However, Adelaide is not always seen in such an ominous light. Two other recent novels set in Adelaide use the city as a relatively benign, safe place, in contrast, implicitly or explicitly, with places where large-scale murderous and evil acts were perpetrated. In this chapter I explore this aspect of Adelaide as a setting for fiction in Amy T. Matthews's *End of the Night Girl* (2011) and J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005).

End of the Night Girl is Matthews's first literary novel (though she has had a successful career as a commercial romance writer) and it won the Adelaide Festival unpublished manuscript award the year after *Time's Long Ruin*. It concerns an Adelaide waiter, Molly, who is haunted by the Holocaust. As a child, she saw a picture in a 1933 encyclopaedia of an unnamed Polish Jew, a teenage girl. Now, in her late twenties, she finds herself compulsively creating the story of this girl, whom she calls Gienia, taking her through

the horrors of the camps to her death just as the Russians arrive to liberate them. Molly, like her creator Matthews, is not Jewish, and has no personal associations with Holocaust victims, but although this fact puzzles other characters in the novel, it is not unusual. Hana Wirth-Nesher points out that ‘shocking images of the Holocaust appalled and shaped the collective memory of non-Jews as well as Jews born right after the war’ (310), and it continues to exert a horrified fascination over subsequent generations – beyond the reach of personal memory – with a constant stream of memoirs, novels and films exploring many and varied aspects of the phenomenon.

The problems involved in writing about the Holocaust have been extensively discussed in the critical literature. Esther Marion notes that ‘Writing on the Nazi genocide has been marked by the tension between rupture and continuity’, and goes on to argue that ‘positing the Holocaust as an ultimate rupture denies it a vital place in memory and history, leaving a space of erasure rather than inquiry’ (1020). On the other hand, if Nazi atrocities are seen as continuous with some notion of human normality, this may open the door to a troubling moral relativism. Marion concludes that Auschwitz, and the Holocaust more generally, challenges writers ‘to listen and forge responsive and responsible approaches’, rather than allowing it to be set apart from the course of history (1022).

I argue that Matthews has taken up this challenge in a particularly thoughtful and responsible way. Early critical reaction to her novel has been positive on the whole, though some reviewers haven’t quite got the point. Naomi Milthorpe, in the *Canberra Times*, understands that ‘Matthews is a writer well aware of the limits of fiction, and of the brutalities inflicted upon readers and characters by a literary writer in search of meaning’. On the other hand, Christopher Bantick, in the *Australian*, writes, ‘this is a bold novel, yet I can’t help thinking Matthews should have written a stand-alone story about the Holocaust and not attempted to splice the contemporary with the historical. *Gienia’s story matters; Molly’s does*

not' (added emphasis). This assessment seems to me extraordinary, with its morally dubious dismissal of the life of one young woman in favour of another. In any case, countless authors have mined the horrors of the Holocaust, whereas *End of the Night Girl*, as Matthews told me in an interview, 'is in essence ... a novel about the ethics of fictionalising the Holocaust'. She also spoke to me informally about the difficulties of getting this book published—about agents and publishers who suggested she remove the Holocaust sections of the book and turn it into more easily marketable 'chick lit'.² Without both elements, *End of the Night Girl* would be a competent novel, but would not have anything like the same searching power and impact, and the Adelaide setting is an integral part of its structure.

Molly is very much an Adelaide woman. She lives in the upper-middle-class suburb of Parkside, and, after her shifts as a silver service waiter, parties at the Mars Bar nightclub or the Exeter Hotel. She used to go to the movies at the Piccadilly in North Adelaide with her unrequited love, Peter, who lived along the road in Childers Street. Peter has left for Sydney with his partner, another relationship has recently ended, and Molly is stuck in a dead-end waiting job, easy prey for the Chef whose marriage is on the rocks. Her stepsister, up to now always dauntingly successful and unsympathetic, descends from interstate and turns out to be pregnant and in need of her help.

Meanwhile, Gienia's story is taking over Molly's life, and she doesn't understand why. One of the problems that this novel poses and does not entirely resolve is the troubling ethical question of the way Molly is using the story almost as therapy for her own difficulties. When she is treated cruelly and finds herself comparing her pain with Gienia's, she has to tell herself, 'There is no equivalence' (168). 'I build horrors, to make mine trivial, and send her into hell. This is something you're not supposed to do. It feels like digging up a corpse for its

² Amy T. Matthews, personal communication 26 July 2011.

jewellery. Or worse, its organs' (172). But she keeps noticing links between the two worlds. She sits in her Parkside flat watching the television documentary *Shoah*, and the camera pans 'across the fields near Chelmno. It looks like Smithfield Plains. Like you could drive over the horizon and be on Main North Road, like you could drive to Elizabeth City Centre and order a cappuccino and a biscotti' (186).

But of course Adelaide in the early twenty-first century is not Poland during World War Two. Molly's pain is genuine but it is not inflicted by a powerful malevolent regime bent on destroying her and her whole community. 'You know what you've done,' she says to her character. 'You've taken away my right to be anything but happy' (193). At the same time, the propensity of human beings for casual cruelty is something she witnesses continually, and sometimes suffers, in her work. Matthews drew on her own experiences as a waiter when writing *End of the Night Girl*:

You learn a lot about human nature when you're a waiter and a lot of it is depressing. People—both customers and workmates—can be awful to you over the most trivial things. I quit waiting forever one day when a man yelled at me about a side-salad. He was red-faced and furious and out to humiliate me because of a salad. ... That kind of behaviour in some ways made sense of the Holocaust for me. Because how many times have you heard someone ask in bewilderment 'How could they do something like that?' and yet I'd go to work and be cursed at and humiliated over a bowl of lettuce leaves. There is no equivalence, but those moments always struck me like a warning. Some people revel in having power over other people; or they're liable to forget that you're a human being at all. (Dooley)

Nevertheless, Molly's pain is something she can work through and conquer, with help from her family and friends and with her own growing maturity, in her own time, without interference, or indeed with help, if she needs it, from the government. She can quit her job if she is unhappy, and she won't starve or be sent to a camp. She can go back to university and finish one of the courses she has abandoned, or get another job. The only malevolent force in Adelaide is that inherent in human nature, and Molly comes to understand that she is not always faultless herself: she has her reasons, but she can be cruel to her nearest relatives. If there is a moral, or at least some kind of accommodation reached, in *End of the Night Girl*, it is that despite the fact that it is sheer luck which has granted Molly a life free of the unmerited and state-sanctioned persecution suffered by so many millions, she can and must overcome the guilt she feels which is holding her back and blighting her life.

J.M. Coetzee's Adelaide in *Slow Man*, similarly, is not a threatening place. In an essay about the Australian settings for Coetzee's late novels, Melinda Harvey has noted their difference from the novels set in South Africa where 'characters are locked into hierarchical power relations or ties of responsibility and obligation, be they loath to them or not, and the plots are, as if accordingly, wound as tightly as springs', while the sketchy settings and 'listless plots' of the Australian novels suggest 'that history and politics are hermetic discourses in Australia that have little to do with the private affairs of its citizens' (29). In *Slow Man* Paul Rayment's problems belong, like Molly's in *End of the Night Girl*, to the realm of the personal rather than the political. In this case, however, the contrast with the politically charged environment is not made explicit. When Coetzee spoke at Flinders University Library in 2004, he told a questioner that the theme of ageing was something he was exploring in his current work (*Fridays*). This theme is present in earlier novels like *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*, but the political dimensions of those books rather overshadow it. As Harvey points out, 'for Coetzee in Australia rendering place becomes an option, not an

obligation—something he had always dreamed of’ (30). In his Australian books he is free to consider the personal divorced from the political, while in South Africa, like it or not, the political implications of writing are under constant scrutiny.

Adelaide, the city where Coetzee has lived since 2002, appears in *Slow Man* as a strange collocation of disconnected place names, often lacking in geographical logic. Why is Paul Rayment, who lives in North Adelaide, riding down Magill Road on a bicycle loaded with his grocery shopping? (41). Anybody who knows Adelaide would realise how implausible that is: there are no shopping destinations along Magill Road which are in any way superior to what is available much closer at hand, including the Adelaide Central Market. Magill Road is, however, an appropriate setting for a catastrophic accident involving a bicycle and a fast car. Similarly, Coniston Terrace, where Paul lives, does not exist, though most of the other places mentioned in the novel—the River Torrens, the suburb of Munno Para, Rundle Mall—do. There are, in fact, not many specific place names used in the novel, and even when they are there is no sense of the particularity of North Adelaide—nothing to match Matthews’s Rundle Street East, or even her restaurant Green River, which is fictional and even geographically impossible but evoked with a strong sense of place, ‘looking down over the sloping suburbs, the parklands, the winding river’ (181). When Paul visits a shop in Rundle Mall, the main shopping area of the Adelaide CBD, his arrival there is not described at first. He relates it later, in interior monologue, and even then it is couched in the conditional, which has the effect of making the description rather abstract: ‘If he battles the crowds on Rundle Mall, if he bargains and cajoles and pays for stuff he does not need, it is not, or not just, for the sake of a child he has never laid eyes on’ (171).

I am not suggesting that this is a deficiency in Coetzee’s writing. Susan Smit-Marais and Marita Wenzel, in an article about his novel *Disgrace*, observe that ‘even though the events that are portrayed appear to be realistic, the verisimilitude of their representation is not

the purpose of their portrayal' (209). Brian McAllister, further, claims that in postmodern narratives the accurate representation of space, and time as well, is not only irrelevant: 'a determinate chronotope becomes unattainable, unnecessary, and undesirable' (58), and 'the chronotopes of art and life are two different but interdependent levels of dialogue' (68). Postmodernism is, of course, a disputed term, and is often linked with an irresponsibility which is quite foreign to Coetzee's serious purpose,³ but without entering into a debate about whether Coetzee is in all respects a postmodern writer, I think it is clear that many of his novels use techniques and modes which characterise what is generally accepted as postmodern. In Jean-François Lyotard's words,

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to present a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (xxiv)

From the beginning of his career, Coetzee's novels have 'search[ed] for new presentations ... in order to present a stronger sense of the unrepresentable'. David Attwell, in a recent article on *The Master of Petersburg*, points out that Coetzee inserts a nineteenth-century shot tower into St Petersburg for the purpose of his narrative:

³ In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes, 'There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls "the subject supposed to know"' (65).

There is no shot tower in St Petersburg. Nor has there been one. ... Shot towers are conical structures of up to seventy meters tall, designed for the manufacture of ammunition. ... J.M. Coetzee puts a shot tower in St Petersburg, on Stolyarny Quay, to be precise, in his novel. ... It is a brilliant insertion, appropriate to the period if not to the place, and it looms organically out of the world of the novel, which is full of perverted fantasy, obscure motives and dark threats. (25)

Dostoevsky scholars complain that 'he makes only a very perfunctory stab at filling in the St Petersburg background' (Attwell 27). But what he has done is create a St Petersburg to suit his literary purpose, and similarly in *Slow Man* he creates an Adelaide to suit his purpose. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the first chapter, or 'Lesson', is titled 'Realism', and throughout it there are deliberate references to the constructed nature of the illusion of reality created in fiction, the 'signs of a moderate realism' with which the author carefully studs the narrative (4). Zoe Wicomb sees the a-topic aspect of *Slow Man* similarly as a function of its metafictional nature; perhaps a further 'lesson' on the nature of realism, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Costello (the character in *Slow Man*) when she and Paul visit the Jokićs' house in Munno Para:

When Costello repeatedly comments on the Jokićs' house with its Japanese garden,—
—'So real! ... So authentic! ... Who would have thought it!' (242) —Paul, who exists on a different level of reality, assumes that she is being ironic. For the reader, however, it is surely a reference to the protean nature of representations, the propensity of fiction to slip beyond the author's control, and to beget further fictions. The Jokićs as characters ... have, unlike Paul, taken off, and represent a level of reality at which even the author must marvel. The fiction, turned in upon itself, cannot

be cut adrift from referentiality; even the illusionary must refer to the world of things, so that the simulacral nature of a Japanese garden in an Australian suburb does not detract from its reality. (Wicomb 225)

It is often difficult to know, in this prosaic novel, despite its sceptical and unimaginative narrator, what is 'really' happening. Paul wonders at one stage whether he has entered a bizarre life beyond death, and Elizabeth Costello, also, refers to Magill Road as 'the very portal to the abode of the dead' (*Slow Man*, 83).

Nevertheless, although evoking Adelaide as a concrete location might be beside the point for Coetzee's purposes, the city, and Australia in general, do have certain important qualities in *Slow Man*. Paul is the victim of an accident caused by careless driving, which could happen in the best-regulated city. He is not abandoned by society: rather, it offers more help than he is willing to accept: 'Why should he not,' he asks himself, 'settle for a modestly circumscribed life in a city that is not inhospitable to the frail aged?' (26). Authority is not threatening: lost in thought in Rundle Mall, he finds himself addressed by someone: 'He is staring into the eyes, the entirely kindly eyes, of a young woman in blue uniform. A police officer' (172). Sue Kossew is of the opinion that Adelaide's 'famously sedate pace may ... account for the "slow" in the title' (63). Elizabeth Costello, who is a Melbourne resident, adds weight to this argument: Adelaide is, for her, a place where you can still get Friar's Balsam (226), 'just the place for a bath chair' (262) and 'too much like a graveyard' (231): 'a dozy city that does not provide outlets for all the restlessness' in the bones of 'lively young chaps' like Drago Jokić (219). Indeed, the 'liveliness' of the young male seems to be the principle threat in the Adelaide of *Slow Man*, whether embodied in the reckless Wayne Blight, behind the wheel of the car which hits Paul on Magill Road, or in Drago, who, with his mate Shaun, 'a pimply red-head ... to whom he has taken a dislike at first sight' (181), replaces

Paul's precious antique photos with his photo-shopped versions. Marijana worries that her teenage son is running with 'wild friends, wild boys' (74), and that 'Adelaide no good, just pull him down' (90), but it is hardly a reflection on Adelaide's safety per se. Paul replies,

This is not an easy country for a boy to grow up in. ... A climate of manliness prevails. A lot of pressure on a boy to excel in manly deeds, manly sports. Be a daredevil. Take risks. It is probably different back where you came from. (75)

He immediately rethinks: 'What does he know about the forms that manliness takes in south-eastern Europe?' (75). Indeed, he speculates that the Jokićs have come to Australia because 'if a better, more peaceable life is not to be found in Australia, where is it to be found?' (40). The question of migration and national identity is another significant theme in *Slow Man*. Kossew points out that 'a number of the characters in *Slow Man* ... do not identify themselves as "Australian"' (68), having been born overseas. Marijana's observation that, according to European perceptions, Australia has no history to speak of 'because in Australia everybody is new' (49) seems to resonate throughout the novel: even Paul's photograph collection seems a disembodied, abstract form of history, easily altered to include 'new Australians'. Paul himself is 'a foreigner by nature' (231) as well as an immigrant. According to Kossew, 'Being an outsider ... is both a physical and spiritual state of being for Paul. It is also the way he is able to mark out his own sense of individuality or difference' (68). In Adelaide such individuality is tolerated, if not welcomed. The pressures to conform are not absent but are relatively easy to resist.

In the Adelaide of *Slow Man* and *End of the Night Girl* there are no sinister forces at work. Elizabeth Costello tells Paul that 'this tranquil-seeming world we inhabit contains horrors' (97), but in Adelaide such horrors are caused by illness, injury and old age, not

malign ideologies or dictatorships, and unhappiness is a matter of personal relationships going wrong and individuals treating each other badly. In each of these novels Adelaide is the ideal setting to explore a difficult phase of life. For Molly in *End of the Night Girl* it is the transition from the irresponsibility of young adulthood to a more mature acceptance of the needs of those who have claims on her, in stark contrast to the same period in the life of Gienia, who is brutally denied the chance to attain that maturity. Even while she survives, her life becomes gradually reduced to a frenzied, selfish competition for food, clothing and shelter with others equally victimised; altruism and care for the weak becomes an unaffordable luxury. In *Slow Man*, Paul is brought face to face with old age. At one stage he wonders whether Elizabeth has ‘descended on him ... not to write him into a book but to induct him into the company of the aged’ (191). Harvey points out that Coetzee’s ‘late novels ... attempt “to face directly the one question that truly engage[s] his soul: how to live,” and this project is *en train* thanks to the escape from place that Australia has made possible’ (32).⁴ What I am about to conclude is a little like Ava Gardner’s famous but apocryphal comment that Melbourne is ‘the perfect place to make a film about the end of the world’. Instead of a cruel or murderous city, I contend that for Coetzee Adelaide is the perfect setting for a novel not just about how to live, but about how to grow old and die.

⁴ Harvey’s quotation here is from Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* 192-3.

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